

# The Ferocity of Self: History and Consciousness In Southern Literature

LEWIS P. SIMPSON  
*Louisiana State University*

According to orthodox interpretation, the poets and novelists of the twentieth-century South have found their inspiring motive in a sense of tangible attachment to a world immediately descended from an antebellum community focused in the family. Against my own inclination to cherish this notion, I am going to make the contrary suggestion that the essential motive of southern writers has been their recognition—willing and unwilling, conscious and unconscious—of their relationship to an Old South that in its inmost nature was centered less in the family than in the self. I shall employ three model figures of southern literary history in my argument: Thomas Jefferson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Although selective and fragmentary, my remarks indicate a revision of our attitude toward the literary treatment of the Old South as the emblem of a society of manners and customs. But, I should stress, I am not talking about the South as a symbol in the popular literary imagination; I am discussing the South as a subtle symbol—a metaphorical essence—in the imagination of the gifted literary mind.

I must at once confront the formidable figure of Allen Tate, who in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" declares unqualifiedly that whether residing on the plantation or the farm—whether represented by the Lees of Virginia or the Tates of Tate's Creek Pike in Kentucky—the family was the center of Old South culture. Yet if I may anticipate my argument, Tate proves to be more friendly than inimical to it. Defining the family as the heart of a society of manners and custom, the center of an integral or "organic" society, he makes an arresting connection in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" between the Old South society of family, the southern society of his own time, and the twentieth-century southern literary imagination. Unlike the dialectical mode of imagination

in contemporary New England, embodied in Emerson's abstract figure of the American Scholar (or in "Man Thinking"), the Old South mode of imagination, Tate says, was rhetorical and was embodied in the *rhetor*, that is, the rhetorician, or the "gentleman as man talking." To quote directly from Tate's "A Southern Mode of the Imagination":

The accomplished Christian gentleman of the Old South was the shadow, attenuated by evangelical Calvinism, of his Renaissance spiritual ancestor, who had been the creation of the rhetorical tradition, out of Aristotle through Cicero, distilled finally by Castiglione. By contrast, the New England sage, embodied in Ralph Waldo Emerson, took seriously what has come to be known since the Industrial Revolution as the life of the mind: an activity a little apart from life, and perhaps leading to the alienation of the "intellectual" of our time. The protective withdrawal of the New England sage into dialectical truth lurks back of Emerson's famous definition of manners as the "invention of a wise man to keep a fool at a distance" . . . . The notorious lack of self-consciousness of the ante-bellum Southerner made it almost impossible for him to define anything; least of all could he imagine the impropriety of a definition of manners. Yet had a Southern contemporary of Emerson decided to argue the question, he might have retorted that manners are not *inventions* but *conventions* tacitly agreed upon to protect the fool from the consciousness of his folly.<sup>1</sup>

After the Civil War, Tate observes, the manner of literary imagining in the Old South changed. Writers in a society that had been like that of Republican Rome, "short in metaphysicians and great poets, and long in moralists and rhetoricians," eventually shifted from the rhetorical to the dialectical mode of conceiving life. One signal of this change Tate points to is the inwardness of the action in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this novel, he says, "The action is generated inside the characters: there is internal dialogue, a conflict within the self." In the manner of storytelling from which *Huckleberry Finn* descends, that of Southern humor, the author—such as A. B. Longstreet or George Washington Harris—is a gentleman telling a story about "low-life" people to other gentlemen. He resembles the *rhetor*, "the speaker who was eloquent before the audience but silent in himself."<sup>2</sup> But Huck himself is the teller of his story, and telling it, he develops a

quarrel within himself about its meaning. He weaves a subtle dialectic of consciousness. Describing the interior drama in *Huckleberry Finn*, Tate refers to Yeats's noted epigram: "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the existentialist interpretation of history began to preoccupy Americans after the Second World War, we have been much engaged with the dialectic of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old semi-literate waif, whose home was an empty hogshead on a Mississippi River dock. His story has come to seem a prototype of the existential self's experience of history, revealing how the self experiencing the immutability of its presence in history derives from the intensity of its resistance to its condition the sanction of authenticity. This self-accreditation of the self is something like a replacement for the grace of God. But, I had better observe, I am moving away from Tate's argument toward the direction of an argument like that in Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*. In "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," Tate is not interested in demonstrating how the dialectic of history and self in *Huckleberry Finn* foreshadows the vogue of existentialism in America. His purpose is to construct a backdrop for the transformation of the Southern literary imagination when, after the First World War, Southern writers "looked around and saw for the first time since about 1830 that the Yankees were not to blame for everything," and seeing this converted the Southern legend of "heroic defeat and frustration . . . into a universal myth of the human condition."<sup>4</sup> More specifically, Tate might have observed, they converted the Southern legend, defined by the Vanderbilt Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand* as the heroic story of the opposition between modernism and traditionalism, into a struggle between two cultures, the industrial and the agrarian. In effect the Agrarian argument said that the writer could associate himself either with the modern society of isolated and fragmented selves or with the old corporate, hierarchical society of manners and custom, in which the problem of being a self never arose. Tate, subscribing to the latter alternative, argued paradoxically that the Southern writer could realize himself by self-consciously fostering the recovery of a culture in which unself-conscious existence would be possible, namely, a Southern culture of manners and custom.

By the time Tate proposed in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" the large distinction between the functioning of the literary imagination in New England and the South during antebellum

times, his ideas about the South were so well-known (the time was 1958 to be exact) he could assume that his audience would understand that he implicitly excluded one prominent antebellum Southern man of letters from his definition of the Southern rhetorical mode. This was a Southerner who had indeed imagined what Tate says the Southerner could never imagine: the "impropriety of a definition of manners." I refer of course to Thomas Jefferson, whose credentials as a Southerner the young Allen Tate had, you might say, formally lifted thirty years earlier, when in a letter to Donald Davidson he promulgated a "tactical program" to be employed by the incipient Agrarian movement.

For the great ends in view—the ends may be only an assertion of principle, but this in itself is great—for this end we must have a certain discipline; we must crush minor differences of doctrine under a single idea. I suggest a repudiation of Jefferson and a revised statement of the South Carolina idea. We shall never refute Progress with the doctrine of a man whose negative side made Progress possible. Jefferson's system (!) was made to oppose an illusory monarchy in the U.S. In short we cannot merely fight centralization; we must envisage a centralization of a different and better kind. In fact, we must here oppose one of the ideas of the Southern tradition. Emotionally this does me considerable violence because I am, emotionally, a Jeffersonian. This is what I mean by discipline.<sup>5</sup>

Tate is delicate about the reason Jefferson is not an acceptable ancestor. Interpreting Jefferson as only a moderate advocate of the Enlightenment, he considers his extreme emphasis on the moral autonomy of the individual to have been a tactical necessity in justifying the overthrow of the King's authority in America. But in his insistence on individualism, Jefferson unintentionally aided and abetted the notion of "progress," a code word for all the evils Tate associated with the displacement of the old, decentered agrarian community of stable values by the Hamiltonian, capitalistic state of centralized banking and brazen economic enterprise. In the interest of recovering the agrarian community, Tate indicates, the neo-agrarians of the twentieth-century South, even at the expense of rejecting the Jeffersonian heritage of individualism, must impose on themselves a discipline enabling them to think and act (in contrast to the secessionists of the 1860s) as a unified, doctrinaire group. For the sake of the new Southern movement, Tate was willing to make an exemplary, categorical

abandonment of his emotional attachment to Jefferson. This commitment, however, involved Tate in a situation that was more complicated than he probably ever fully understood.

T. S. Eliot says that the critic deals in the ideal, the poet in the actual. As *rhetors*, critics of society, Jefferson and Tate projected ideal constructs of order: in Jefferson's case a flexible order designed to insure maximum freedom for the individual, in Tate's a recovered traditional order in which the individual expressed himself through the community. As poets—and Jefferson too was a poet in his possession of, or in his possession by, what may be broadly called the poetic imagination—both Tate and Jefferson enacted in their writings, directly or by implication, the complex and unhappy actualities of the struggle for identity by a new entity of being, the modern secular, rational self. Emerging out of the lapsing culture of class and family, hierarchy and degree, the modern self tended to be portrayed by the poetic imagination as the victim, often as a prisoner, and in any event as the enemy of the normative society. The self became, Lionel Trilling explains, the "opposing self, contriving as the way of fulfilling its destiny in self-realization, the mode of living in the 'pain' of alienation."<sup>6</sup>

Tate understood, one surmises, if not quite articulately, that like himself Jefferson was essentially not a *rhetor* but a poet. But it is doubtful if Tate fully appreciated the fact that, allowing the *rhetor* to dominate the poet in himself, he suppressed the poet in Jefferson; and it is still more doubtful if he comprehended that the author of the Declaration of Independence suppressed the poet in the image of the *rhetor*. How Jefferson did this is illuminated by referring to his great poetic statement about self and slavery.

Hegel, Trilling points out, first used the term "alienation" to define the mode of the self's existence.<sup>7</sup> It is not incidental to our understanding of Jefferson that Jefferson and Hegel were contemporaries, or that *The Phenomenology of Mind* was published during Jefferson's presidency. Both Jefferson and Hegel were crucial figures in the visionary creation of the poetic and politics of the modern self. Both gloried in the displacement by the new poetic and politics of the poetic and politics of class and family that had operated in the old culture of manners and custom. Both too suggested the costs of this displacement. Jefferson, to be sure, happily itemized the cost. One expense was the loss of the corporate family which perpetuated itself through time. The world, Jefferson declared, belonged to the living. Each generation possesses the world on its own terms; the dead have no claims that

transcend generational sovereignty, which is but another way of stating the doctrine of the radical sovereignty of the self. Assuming the validity of this doctrine, each individual speaks of *my* generation; the generation becomes a symbol of the historical self more than of an historical group. Jefferson did not blink at the potential price to be paid for the usurpation of generational continuity by the rise of the self. To assert the self's right to self, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, he said, there should be a violent revolution each generation to keep the tree of liberty well watered by the blood of martyrs.<sup>8</sup>

But there is still a greater expense—the chief expense, one might say—attached to the rational self's realization of its identity. As described explicitly by Hegel, this is the alteration of a social relationship that may be accounted more basically important than that of the family, that between lord and servant or master and slave. Jefferson was never explicit about the expense of this change in the structure of human society—in human culture—to the psyche, but he implied it in one notorious, shattering moment of dramatic poetry in the *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Here it is revealed as a fundamental and irreparable estrangement of self from the community, which results not only in a perpetually violent opposition of self to the community but in a fierce division within the self.

In the *Notes on Virginia* Jefferson responds to a series of questions about Virginia put to him by a French man of letters (a philosophe), who was the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia during the American Revolution. The eighteenth Query is: (What are) "*The particular customs and manners that may happen to be received in that State?*" Jefferson begins his reply with one or two general observations: "It is difficult to determine the standard by which the manners of a nation may be tried, whether *catholic* or *particular*. It is more difficult for a native to bring to that standard the manners of his own nation, familiarized to him by habit." But having offered these commonplace observations, Jefferson—uncharacteristically compulsive—moved by an anxiety he would never in his long life unveil so plainly again—begins a recital, having the force of a visionary experience, of the "unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us."

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the

other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passions toward his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by its odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson's vision not only sees the destruction of manners and morals in the home of the slave master and his progeny; it embraces the consequences of slavery to Virginia, and to the would-be nation at large, that as Jefferson wrote the *Notes on Virginia* was fighting to realize the aims of the world historical manifesto, authored by Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence.

And with what execration [Jefferson continues in the eighteenth Query] should the statesman be loaded who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, the amor patriae of the other. For if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another: in which he must lock up the faculties of his nature, contribute as far as depends on his individual endeavours to the evanishment of the human race, or entail his own miserable condition on the endless generations proceeding from him. With the morals of a people, their industry also is destroyed. For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed are ever seen to labour.<sup>10</sup>

From a view of the destruction of the political and economic integrity of the nation by slavery, Jefferson's gaze expands to apocalyptic dimensions.

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but by his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference. The Almighty has no attribute which can side with us in such a contest.<sup>11</sup>

At this point in the eighteenth Query Jefferson recovers his habitual poise and in concluding declines momentarily from the apocalyptic: "—But it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil. We must be contented to hope they will force their way into everyone's mind. I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution." But the final sentence of the eighteenth Query reaffirms the Doomsday theme: "The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation that is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation."<sup>12</sup>

It is intriguing to ponder how Jefferson's analysis of mastery and bondage in the *Notes on Virginia* anticipates the analysis in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), published some twenty-five years after Jefferson wrote his book and twenty years after it was issued in a public printing (1787). Let me call on the authoritative summation of Hegel's complex argument by the distinguished student of the problem of slavery, David Brion Davis. Pointing to Hegel's argument that the "slavish consciousness" is an "object which embodies the 'truth' of the 'master's certainty of himself,'" Davis observes how Hegel

developed an intricate dialectic of dependence and independence, of losing and finding one's identity in another consciousness, but his central point is that the master is caught in an "existential impasse," . . . because the master's identity depends upon being recognized by a slavish and supposedly unessential consciousness. Even to outsiders, his identity consists of being a master who consumes the produce of his slave's work. Accordingly, the master is incapable of trans-



ending his own position, for which he risked his life and for which he could lose his life, should the slave decide on a second match of strength. The master is trapped by his own power, which he can only seek to maintain. He cannot achieve the true autonomy that can come only from the recognition by another consciousness that he regards as worthy of such recognition. The condition of omnipotent lordship, then, becomes the reverse of what it wants to be: dependent, static, and unessential.<sup>13</sup>

Although the American masters had not acquired their slaves by direct capture but, if not inheriting them, bought them either on the domestic or the world slave market, they did in owning slaves put their lives at risk of a slave rebellion, the most feared event in the southern states. In his pre-Hegelian depiction of the master-slave relationship, of which he himself was so closely a part, Jefferson sees rebellion as virtually fore-ordained. He expresses the hope that the slaves, whom he strikingly accords the status of citizens—their spirit rising, while that of the masters abates—somehow will come into a mutuality of freedom by an act of total emancipation by the masters. But this possibility is tenuous. Any hope of its becoming actuality seems to be connected with the presumed subject of the eighteenth Query, manners. Better manners on the part of the slave masters would allow for the rising spirit of the slaves and make possible their eventual freedom. Yet the eighteenth Query of the *Notes on Virginia* is hardly a plea for improved manners by the masters. Jefferson did not, it is obvious, conceive his society to be a society of manners and custom. He addresses the eighteenth Query, and the whole of his book, to the abstraction that to Jefferson had become at once the glorious and the terrible model of society. The model was embodied in the actual addressee, a philosophe. Jefferson, in other words, addressed the rational self. The eighteenth Query of the *Notes* is a plea to a self-centered society which finds its ordering not in manners but in the rational, sovereign self's will to freedom. At the same time and paradoxically Jefferson suggests that the rational, secular, historical self cannot realize its will save through violence. Viewed by Jefferson as the gift of God, the new self that has come into being is the dynamic, transcendent force in history. Operating through Providence, this force wills to manifest its presence in every individual human being, including the alien from Africa who is presently ground down in the dust of Virginia. Although elsewhere in the *Notes on Virginia* (and much more strongly in writings

outside this work), the Negro is seen by Jefferson as an inferior human being, in the fully luminous moment of the poetic vision of the self's dominion in Query XVIII, he is regarded as equal in selfhood to any other human being. Underlying his insistence that the slave must rise to freedom—either through his own power or the agency of God or both—is the recognition by Jefferson the slave master, whether consciously so or not, that as a self he seeks through actual or psychic force, or both, to exert dominion over another self. And perhaps we detect a deeper recognition by Jefferson: that the self of the slave is not merely an object embodying the self of the master but is truly another and opposing self, that is yet part of the master's self. Does not Jefferson implicitly acknowledge that the master, believing the slave to be the object of his will, lives in an illusion of freedom; that the measure of the master's freedom is in the strength of this autistic illusion? Does Jefferson not imply that the illusion is never powerful enough to withstand the master's realization that his slave is integral to his consciousness of his (the master's) own identity? Finally, does not Jefferson the Virginia slave master imply that he and fellow masters—even as they conducted a bloody revolution designed to realize the autonomy of the rational self—experienced the blind willfulness of the self, pleasuring itself in indolence and violence, involving itself in the continuous aggressions of the self against itself?

The eighteenth Query of the *Notes on Virginia* is an ominous gloss on the Declaration of Independence. Calling into question the very possibility of the self as an independent entity, it is in a sense a text counter to the Declaration, at the least a deep questioning of the Declaration's basic premise, the nature of the inalienable will of the self, which is the source of the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Intimating that the definition of the self as free inextricably involves the definition of the self as enslaved—that the self of the master and the self of the slave are but aspects of the self in its full dimension—Jefferson's vision of the master, and slave, takes on the character of a metaphor of the self's essential and paradoxical unity, which consists in its profoundly tense opposition to itself. In his way Jefferson knew the quarrel out of which, Yeats says, poetry is made. While we take the *Notes on Virginia* largely to be a critical exposition, we discover in Query XVIII an apocalyptic drama, its theme consisting in the chief issue of both American history and American poetry. This is to say, the nature of the self and self-consciousness.

I have often speculated (more than once in print, I must confess) on the immediate juxtaposition in the *Notes on Virginia* of the vision of masters and slaves and the apposite vision (in the nineteenth Query, entitled "Manufactures") of Virginia (or the new nation as a whole) as a land populated, in Jefferson's term, by "the chosen people of God," these people being a self-sufficient, landowning yeomanry. Free forever from Europe and its cities fouled by factories and poverty, each on his own freehold, American farmers, according to Jefferson, enjoy a pure and permanent, virtue-engendering relationship to the earth. Free from the slavery of economic dependence, they are—by implication of its absence in Jefferson's portrayal of them—free from the institution of chattel slavery. The pastoral vision in the nineteenth Query of the *Notes on Virginia*—may we infer?—represents Jefferson's necessary repression of the immediately preceding vision of the slave culture of Virginia. Never again, so far as my knowledge of his writing goes, does Jefferson allow himself to imagine such a doomsday vision as that in the eighteenth Query. Having once come to the lip of the abyss of self and having peered into the fearful depths, he sealed his mind in rationality (in his faith in rationality) and continued to the end of his days to be both an advocate of maximum freedom for the individual and a slavemaster.

How much Jefferson repressed of his actual personal experience of slavery in order to live in the fiction of the rational self is probably impossible to determine. Conjecture on this score might be more possible if the story of Jefferson and the slave girl, Sally Hemmings, could either be absolutely proved or disproved. Around ever since the troubled days of Jefferson's presidency, the story in its recent psycho-historical elaboration by the late Fawn Brodie is no more convincing than it has ever been. Actually we do not need to refer to his alleged love affair with Sally Hemmings in order to cite a dramatic, specific instance in which Jefferson placed a wall of silence around his personal experience of the world the slaveholders made. There is one well documented in factual history, made famous in Robert Penn Warren's well-known fiction, the "play in verse and voices," *Brother to Dragons*. What Jefferson repressed was his knowledge—inescapable under the circumstances—of the murder by dismemberment of a slave of his nephew Lilburne Lewis, an event that occurred in Livingstone County, Kentucky, in December 1811, at a moment precisely coincident with the great Mississippi Valley earthquake, the most extensive natural violence yet recorded on this continent.

Published in its first version of 1953, *Brother to Dragons* climaxed a search for the meaning of the self in the history of the South (or, to put it another way, the meaning of self and history in the South) that Warren had carried on through his first four novels: *Night Rider*, *At Heaven's Gate*, *All the King's Men*, and *World Enough and Time*. Although many of us would pick his third novel, *All the King's Men*, as the most important work of the first half of Warren's career, there is reason to claim this position for *Brother to Dragons*. There is also reason to hold up the second version of *Brother to Dragons*, published in 1978, as the most significant work of the second half of Warren's career, maybe of his whole career. Considering the way in which this work refused to let go of his imagination, kept drawing him back to contemplate the meaning of that night of terror in the meat-house on the Lewis plantation, one can hardly avoid concluding that *Brother to Dragons*, especially the second—or “new version” as Warren insists on calling it—is central in the Warren canon. For twenty-five years, Warren says, he went back and went back to the poem; finally in what he calls “a protracted and concentrated reliving of the whole process” of writing the original version, he wrote the 1978 version.

Picking up the theme I have been on in these remarks, the relation of self and slavery, let me say that living the comparatively short experience of writing *Brother to Dragons* the first time, Warren was not, like Tate, led to repudiate Jefferson's vision of the slave society of the South as a culture of the self, but to accept it, notably in those aspects Jefferson repressed, both as poetic actuality and historical truth. Indeed in his new version of the tale in verse and voices, Warren represents the Southern slave society as at once a symbol of and an integral part of twentieth-century American society, and of modern society generally: a society of the self, a culture (to use Christopher Lasch's term) of narcissism.

The setting of *Brother to Dragons*, it is true, appears to be a metaphysical dimension. “The main body of the action lies,” says Warren, “in the remote past—in the earthly past of characters long dead—and now they meet at an unspecified place and try to make sense of the action in which they were involved. We may take them to appear and disappear as their urgencies of argument swell and subside. The place of this meeting is, we may say, ‘no place,’ and the time is ‘any time.’ This is but a way of saying that the issues that the characters here discuss are, in my view at least, a human constant.”<sup>14</sup> So they are. But, I think, to some degree Warren misspeaks his own sense of the relation between its

historical context and the action in *Brother to Dragons*. Neither the issues or the characters in the drama are basically understandable outside the context to which they belong, American history. This history is entirely that of a culture of modernity in which the self—the secular, historical self that announced its coming both in the historical figure of Francis Bacon and in the poetic figure of Shakespeare's Hamlet—has experienced not only its isolation in history but, with a singular intensity, the isolation of history in the self. The setting of *Brother to Dragons* is not somewhere outside history; created by tone and mood, it is purely subjective. The stage on which the self appears in the poem is its own desolating awareness of history. Each character in *Brother to Dragons* bears the burden of history imposed by the self's willed acceptance of the purpose of history as its preemptive right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Exploring Jefferson's complete silence about the murder of a slave by his nephew, Warren imagined—entered into—the intimacy with history experienced by Jefferson. Jefferson, the actual Jefferson, who willed to live predominantly by faith in the image of the preemptive rational self, would have disparaged this poetic act. Such deviance from the obvious norm of reality, defying the judgment of the senses, he once said to John Adams, is "an indulgence in speculations hyperphysical and antiphysical." It leads to a "useless," and perhaps "pyrrhonic" disquieting of the mind and may result in a dangerous plunge "into the fathomless abyss of dreams and phantasms."<sup>15</sup> But the Jefferson of *Brother to Dragons*, transformed by Warren into a full-time poet in a spook world, plunges—as once he did in fact briefly in the *Notes on Virginia*—into the abyss of self, where he confronts the problem on which Americans unintentionally but surely staked everything when they renounced their allegiance to a society of manners and custom in 1776. The problem is how to resolve the ineluctable consequence of this act of rejection, namely the closure of history in the self, and the subtle alienation of the self from the self that results.

Jefferson the spook poet and the other characters in *Brother to Dragons*—spook poets all—are conceived as being outside time. They no longer have anything at stake in history. Only the still living poet in the drama, R.P.W. (Warren himself), narrator, large-scale commentator on the action but also chief actor, has a stake. It is nothing less than everything. His own meaning in history depends on his coming to terms with the ghosts of Jefferson, his

sister Lucy Lewis, and her sons, Lilburne and Isham, their cousin Meriwether Lewis, and the slaves, Aunt Cat, and John (the murdered boy). Their confrontation with each other constitutes a quarrel within the poet's self-consciousness of history. The action in *Brother to Dragons* consists essentially in the efforts of R.P.W. to fathom and solve the crisis of his own identity, a crisis that began not in his own physical lifetime but on that night in 1776 when Jefferson—"rectified, annealed," his past "annulled"—"seized the pen, and in the upper room" composed his unparalleled vision of the self's power over history. That crisis announced itself beyond all ignoring, save by utter silence, the night in the Lewis meat-house, thirty-five years later; when, according to Warren's version of the murder, Lilburne Lewis seized the axe handed to him by Isham Lewis and methodically chopped John into bloody parts, throwing these into a fire prepared by the slaves. This event occurred, it is by no means incidental to remark, in Warren's native world of western Kentucky.<sup>16</sup>

One hundred and forty years after the institution of the Republic, the first American Republic, or about eighty-five years into the history of the Republic reconstructed (or the Second American Republic), Warren entered Jefferson's silence about the depravity of his nephews. He discovered a man who had never spoken of this loathsome deed because he had predicated his career on maintaining a distinction: this, between hope in the ideal capacities of the autonomous self for love and justice, on the one hand; and, on the other, the knowledge that the secular, alienated, historical self—deprived of the transcendent reference of heaven or hell—is ruthless in its struggle for identity.

In both versions of *Brother to Dragons*, the action moves toward a climax in the invocation to the Ghost Dance that follows the scene when Jefferson confronts Lilburne. In the first version Jefferson appeals, and in the second version all the spooks appeal, to the "heart by which we live and die." In both versions too this scene is subject to R.P.W.'s interpretation of the story of Jefferson's encounter with the Lewises in a meditation that concludes the play. In both instances the resolving line, as the poet passes through the gate of the forsaken domain of the Lewis family, describes his entry into a world "Sweeter than hope. . . ." Warren, however, has made a number of changes in the concluding portion of *Brother to Dragons*. I would point to a difference effected in the new version—in tone and explicit meaning—by the omission of the last three lines from one section. In the first version we have the lines:

We have yearned in the heart for some identification  
 With the glory of the human effort, and have yearned  
 For an adequate definition of that glory.  
 To make that definition would be, in itself,  
 Of the nature of glory. This is not paradox.  
 It is not paradox, but the best hope.<sup>17</sup>

The last three lines are dropped from the second version. What is lost by the omission is the signification of hope as part of the heart's "intrinsic meditation." Hope has been assigned to the illusion of the self's power to make its own history. Hope, the second version of *Brother to Dragons* indicates, is far less sweet than the knowledge that it is an illusion.

What accounts for the more austere treatment of hope in the new version of *Brother to Dragons*? It is, I would suggest, an increased awareness by the poet of what Jefferson—I mean Jefferson the ghost—says about the human heart and its capacity to love.

I've long since come to the considered conclusion  
 That love, all kinds, is but a mask  
 To hide the brute face of fact,  
 And that fact is the un-uprootable ferocity of self. Even  
 The face of love beneath your face at the first  
 Definitive delight—even that—  
 Is but a mirror  
 For your own ferocity—a mirror blurred with breath,  
 And slicked and slimed with love—  
 And even then, through the interstices and gouts  
 Of the hypocritical moisture, cold eyes spy out  
 From the mirror's cold heart, and thus,  
 Self spies on self  
 In that unsummerable arctic of the human lot.

This passage is not substantially altered from its first version, but one crucial change is to be noted. In the first version Jefferson refers to the "unsummerable arctic of the human alienation," whereas in the second he speaks starkly of the "unsummerable arctic of the human lot."<sup>18</sup> The ferocity of self is not simply an alienating force, possibly subject to love's redeeming power. It is intrinsic to the human condition.

Let me return to Tate's dictum in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" I cited at the beginning: "The notorious lack of self-consciousness of the antebellum Southerner made it almost impossible for him to define anything; least of all could he imagine the

impropriety of a definition of manners." To make this acutely self-conscious interpretation of the antebellum Southerner as an unself-conscious being plausible, I have said, Tate had to banish Jefferson and having done so keep silent about him. The consequence of this action to Tate, I have intimated, may be reckoned as considerable. In denying Jefferson and thereby exempting the Old South from the modern culture of the self, Tate ironically engaged in a stringent exercise of self-will that was in effect an aggression of the critic against the poet. Although he had valuable insights into the consequences attending the chattel enslavement of Africans in America ("The peasant *is* the soil. The Negro slave was a barrier between the ruling class and the soil."),<sup>19</sup> Tate subordinated the development of such a realistic ("poetic") perception into the Old South culture to his rhetorical advocacy of the idea that the South was continuous with the traditional social order of Europe. He was silent about the way that culture in the South had been predicated on the master-slave relationship. He ignored the frustration of the desire of the rational self for autonomy by its dependence for recognition on "a slavish and supposedly unessential consciousness." Highly sophisticated, erudite, one of the truly brilliant literary critics of the century, Tate was hardly a literal reincarnation of the Old South gentleman talking. Yet looking back on his career we see how it was dominated by Tate's adaptation of the role of *rhetor*. Always eloquent, Tate was often silent in himself, even, one feels, in his best known poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Writing to Tate not long after he saw the first version of the "Ode" in 1927, Donald Davidson observed that "you have committed yourself to a poetic scheme, you have adopted a certain rhetoric, you have an invariable method of attack, and . . . you succeed perfectly." But, Davidson continued:

Your poetry, like your criticism, is so astringent that it bites and dissolves what it touches. You have decided that the opposite sort of poetry (say, an *expansive* poetry) can no longer be written in an age where everything is in terrible condition. But this attitude does not merely lie behind your poetry; it gets *into* it, not in the form of poetry, but of aesthetics, so that poem after poem of yours becomes aesthetic dissertation as much as poetry.<sup>20</sup>

Having oversimplified a highly complex poem and Tate's poetry in general, Davidson later modified his attitude toward his friend's poems. But in the reaction initially provoked by the "Ode," he



defined a notable phenomenon in the literary history of the twentieth-century South, one that appears not only in Tate but strongly in John Crowe Ransom, especially the Ransom of *I'll Take My Stand*. Seeking a reference for an "organic" society, Ransom and Tate transformed the Old South *rhetor* into a twentieth-century aesthete and conceived a South shaped by an aesthetic of manners, custom, and tradition. Resisting the aesthetic motivation, Davidson sought to invest the South with the qualities of the heroic. He sought to replace the *rhetor* with the bard or the poet. But in his vehement support of the South against malign forces emanating from the North and East, Davidson was at times close to being a literal reincarnation of the fire-breathing *rhetor*. Of the members of the Fugitive Group who have prominent places in American literary history, Warren most deeply penetrated the silence of the southern *rhetor*, discovering that this silence represents not the silence of the self incorporated in a society of manners and custom but a quarrel within the self: an attempted suppression by the self-conscious *rhetor* of the self's fierce assertion of its sovereign presence, this occurring no less in the American South than in America generally. Maybe Warren does not misspeak the sense of *Brother to Dragons* when he says it is about the "human constant." If we define the human constant to be the self's long struggle to realize the self as the definitive force in history, *Brother to Dragons*, particularly in its second version, may be taken as a portrayal of the way this struggle reaches its culmination in American history. The portrayal centers in the self's experience of its isolation in history and its response, the effort to isolate history in the self. The consequence of this desperate effort is embodied in the unhappy ghost of Jefferson. In the ghost self of this slave master and poet—dispossessed from his long silence by the ferocity of another southern poet-self from a later moment in modern history—the modern self comes into its own presence.

## NOTES

In its early form I read this essay at the Conference on Southern Literature held at The Citadel, Charleston, S.C., April 8-9, 1983. In its present form I presented it as a lecture while serving as Eidson Visiting Lecturer at the University of Georgia, Athens, April 9-13, 1984. For the courtesies extended to me on these occasions I am grateful to, among others, Lt. Colonel W. Bland Mathis of The Citadel and to Professors Coburn Freer and James M. Colvert of the University of Georgia.

<sup>1</sup>"A Southern Mode of the Imagination," *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968), pp. 584-85.

<sup>2</sup>"A Southern Mode of the Imagination," pp. 590-91.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," p. 592.

<sup>4</sup>"A Southern Mode of the Imagination," p. 592.

<sup>5</sup>Tate to Davidson, August 10, 1929, in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and John Tyree Fain (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), pp. 230-33.

<sup>6</sup>Preface, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1975), p. xi.

<sup>7</sup>*The Opposing Self*, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup>Jefferson to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, in *The Portable Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 580.

<sup>9</sup>*The Portable Jefferson*, p. 214.

<sup>10</sup>*The Portable Jefferson*, pp. 214-15.

<sup>11</sup>*The Portable Jefferson*, p. 215.

<sup>12</sup>*The Portable Jefferson*, p. 215.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 561-62.

<sup>14</sup>Foreword to *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* (New York: Random House, 1953), [p. xiv].

<sup>15</sup>Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820, in *The Portable Jefferson*, p. 573.

<sup>16</sup>*Brother to Dragons* (1953), p. 9. An excellent reconstruction of the factual history of the murder will be found in Boynton Merrill, Jr., *Jefferson's Nephews: A Frontier Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>17</sup>*Brother to Dragons* (1953), pp. 213-14. The remarks on *Brother to Dragons* follow in part the discussion in Lewis P. Simpson, "The Concept of the Historical Self," in Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons: A Discussion*, ed. James A. Grimshaw (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 244-49.

<sup>18</sup>*Brother to Dragons: A New Version* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 33; *Brother to Dragons* (1953), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup>Tate, "The Profession of Letters in the South," *Essays of Four Decades*, p. 525.

<sup>20</sup>Davidson to Tate, February 15, 1927, *Literary Correspondence of Davidson and Tate*, p. 186.